

SELECT BOARD

Fiscal Year 2009

The highlight of FY 09 came in the second half, when calendar year 2009 kicked off the Town's 250th birthday. The Founder's Day event in February was the first of many events which the Select Board participated in and enjoyed throughout the year. It was a privilege to serve during this historic celebration.

Amherst's 250th coincided with our "mother" Town of Hadley's 350th, so we had the added honor and good fortune to be included in several of their events as well.

But the year was not just about cakes and parades. The Select Board put considerable effort in to creating and improving its processes in FY 09, particularly as relate to the budget, and to guidance and evaluation of the Town Manager. The following report seeks to summarize our work.

Membership

The fiscal year began with Gerry Weiss as Chair, and members Anne Awad, Alisa Brewer, Diana Stein and Stephanie O'Keeffe. Ms. Awad resigned her seat in August, to move to another town. A reception was held in appreciation of her nearly three full terms of service on the Select Board. After much consideration of when elections can and should be held in Amherst, taking into account the significant student population and the 1975 Appeals Court decision in the case "Walgren v. Amherst Board of Selectmen," a special election was held in November, concurrent with the Presidential election, and Aaron Hayden was elected. Shortly thereafter, and following adoption of a formal policy that reorganization votes should be held after every Select Board election or whenever a majority of members so desire, Ms. O'Keeffe became Chair. Mr. Hayden was reelected during the Annual Town election in the spring, and the fiscal year ended with Ms. O'Keeffe, Mr. Weiss, Ms. Brewer, Ms. Stein and Mr. Hayden as members.

Budget

Much time was spent defining budget policies in order to assist the Town Manager in creating an FY 10 budget that would reflect Select Board philosophy and community values. A budget with significant input on its development would require less revision afterwards and increase the ability to go to Town Meeting united around a municipal budget proposal. Determining and working through this process took time, and included multiple meeting discussions, as well as a Saturday meeting with presentations from Department Heads, and ultimately lead to the Select Board presenting the Town Manager with a formal budget policy document in mid-December. While that was later than optimal, the many discussions around the issue were valuable for informing the Town Manager about Select Board priorities. Having a process and document to work from will make this important task easier in subsequent years.

Guidance on FY 10 budget policy also came from the report generated by the Facilitation of Community Choices Committee, a citizens group tasked with studying the town-wide budget situation, educating the public about it, seeking public input and making recommendations to the Select Board. Those recommendations helped to shape response to the deteriorating economic situation that began in the fall and continued into the spring, leading to an Annual Town Meeting with so much uncertainty about State aid that it necessitated postponing budget consideration to late June. Adhering to FCCC recommendations and Select Board policies, with expert guidance from the Town Manager and Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director, allowed for an approved FY 10 budget that identified and pared down to core programs and services, with the goal of protecting those going forward.

It was an extraordinarily challenging budget situation, but we were fortunate to have clear and prudent policy recommendations to assist us.

Town Manager Evaluation and Goal Setting

An important issue throughout the fall was refinement of the process for evaluating the Town Manager, with the addition of a vital component -- goal setting for the coming year. Such a process benefits from annual updating and improvement, and the model we have created, which includes staff input, will serve us well going forward. Creating the process and clarifying the legalities of what documents could be confidential and what must be public, took time. The Select Board presented the Town Manager with completed evaluations for FY 08 from all Select Board members in early December, and with a formal document outlining FY 09 goals in February. While both were completed later than would have been optimal, the time invested in creating a sound process will pay dividends in future years.

Public Way Issues

As part of our responsibility over the public way, the Select Board approved new and relocated electrical poles related to campus construction projects at Amherst College and UMass. We heard updates on and approved road projects and line painting plans. We approved a crosswalk on Pelham Road to allow safer access to the Amethyst Brook Conservation area, and a new plan allowing parking on one side of Cottage Street to better accommodate emergency vehicles. A temporary lane closure experiment on Lincoln Avenue, to occur in September 2009, was approved as a way to collect data on reducing traffic volume and speed and the effects on surrounding streets, to help inform the planned Town-Wide Traffic Calming Policy.

In the downtown area, new sections of the sidewalk and curb reconstruction plans were approved. Additionally, in an effort to better serve downtown businesses by creating turnover in the prime on-street parking spaces, the Select Board endorsed a Parking Task Force proposal to deter meter feeding through active enforcement of that Town Bylaw.

Town - Gown Relations

The Select Board continues to participate in productive discussions with the colleges and other stakeholders, including the Town of Hadley, the Chamber of Commerce and representatives from State Government to address issues of mutual benefit and mutual concern. A discussion among all of these parties and more was held in January on the subject of regional economic development as it relates to tourism.

We continue to have representation on the Campus Community Coalition, a group that works to discourage high-risk drinking behaviors among students. The Coalition addresses that issue in terms of health and safety, as well as the effect on quality of life in the community.

Such neighborhood concerns continue to be brought to the Select Board, and we attempted to facilitate solutions to specific concerns among neighbors on Sunset Avenue and East Pleasant Street.

General Obligations

Approval of new, revised and renewal licenses under our purview continued as required. We also approved the standard event-related parking requests and street closures. Additionally, the Select Board approved the property tax classifications and the water and sewer rates. Our approval was also required and received for the establishment of a trench permit fee, and reducing fees for driveway, drainage and street opening permits. We also increased the fine for illegal parking in a bus stop. We approved a flat Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) distribution for non-union employees for FY 09, an experimental alternative to the usual equal-percentage COLA increase. All of these approvals were based on the recommendations of staff and appropriate boards and committees.

Committee appointments are among the Select Board's key responsibilities, and we have been working to improve our policies and procedures in this area. In an effort to make sure we have the ability to appoint the best volunteers available to meet each committee's needs, we have opted to end the de facto policies of prohibiting volunteers from serving more than two consecutive terms, and of assuming automatic reappointment to a second term. We have also begun the process of revising and updating the Appointed Committee Handbook and our internal logistics for managing applications and appointments.

In addition to making a year's worth of committee appointments and reappointments, we also established two new committees, both of limited duration: the Save Our Stop committee is dedicated to advocacy for maintaining Amherst's AMTRAK stop and making sure that the Town gets due consideration as area rail changes are contemplated; and the Local Historic District Study Committee is analyzing the opportunities and issues related to establishing Local Historic Districts in Town.

New Initiatives

In an effort to provide greater access to information, the Select Board arranged to make all of its packet materials available on the Town web site. We also sought to reduce waste by minimizing the paper in those packets – saving materials for a future meeting, rather than distributing them again, requesting agendas and minutes of committees that provide them to us electronically rather than in hard copy, etc. We have also ended the longstanding practice of having the Police Department deliver our packets, opting to instead mail them (or make them available for pick up) whenever possible.

Informing the Public

To better inform the public and ourselves, we have established a formal schedule for receiving detailed budget updates. The Assistant Town Manager/Finance Director reports quarterly on how revenue and expenses are tracking compared to expectations, and answers questions from the Select Board. Similarly, we began what we hope will be an annual update on the Town's litigation costs, detailing expenses incurred for lawsuits involving the Town for the previous calendar year. Both help to provide better understanding of the Town's financial resources and how they are being used.

It was also to Select Board meetings that people turned for information about important Town issues and initiatives including: the Kendrick Park planning progress; the fire and ambulance contract negotiations with Hadley; the Town's emergency preparedness situation, Master Plan updates, The Donahue Institute's successful challenge to our Federal census numbers; and of course, Select Board recommendations on Town Meeting warrant articles. Providing a forum to inform the public about vital workings of Town government is one of the Select Board's most important roles.

Other Issues and Accomplishments

- We created a policy for flying the commemorative flags downtown for September 11th, opting for 2008, and every third year thereafter, modeled on the one-third vote of support by Town Meeting in 2007, when it was asked about flying them annually.
- We dealt with our first serious dog complaint in several years, and on the advice of Town Counsel, opted to delegate authority for holding a hearing to the Town Manager. Ultimately, an order of compliance conditions was approved by the Select Board, and the owner was allowed to keep the dog as long as compliance is maintained.
- The Select Board sponsored a warrant article updating the Town's Human Rights Bylaw to include gender identity and expression, and genetic information, among the categories of non-discrimination.

- We took an active role in advocacy this year, with a particular focus on State legislation to assist municipalities. We wrote letters and made phone calls on the key issues of local option meals tax and increased local lodging tax, and eliminating the property tax loophole on telecom poles and wires and the State legislature ultimately approved these. Our efforts regarding greater local control of health care plan design and a single-payer national health care system continue. We also wrote or signed on to letters supporting clean energy initiatives, distribution of federal stimulus funds for important local and regional projects, and more. When Town Meeting approved placing a question to increase the Community Preservation Act surcharge on the ballot, the then four-member Select Board decided to write pro and con columns for the newspaper about the issue, reflecting our 2-2 split on the issue.
- We negotiated an understanding between the Town and the private Fourth of July Parade Committee for 2009 to encourage broad participation, including expression of political viewpoints in a manner that is in keeping with the celebratory spirit of the parade. The parade was a big success, and we hope to continue this productive partnership with the parade committee for many years to come.
- Mr. Weiss is representing the Select Board on the search committee for a new Chief of Police, and Mr. Hayden will represent us on the search committee for a new Fire Chief, with both searches to be completed in FY 10.

It is an honor to serve Amherst as members of the Select Board, and we appreciate the opportunity to do so.

Respectfully submitted by:

Stephanie O'Keeffe
Gerry Weiss
Alisa Brewer
Diana Stein
Aaron Hayden